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These Dreamers will leave the U.S. if a DACA deal isn't reached

by Parija Kavilanz @CNNMoney

February 16, 2018: 10:41 AM ET



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Alex and Daniela Velez have come to peace with the difficult choice they will need to make if Congress doesn't reach a deal for those covered by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program by its March 5 deadline: They will leave the country.

"Alex and I are both over this [DACA situation]," said Daniela, who is 24 years old. "If DACA ends, I will leave with Alex. I will close my business, leave work and school."

The Velez sisters are two of nearly 689,000 young adults who are currently protected from deportation under DACA. The Obama-era program allowed young Dreamers who were brought to the United States as children to come out from the shadows and enroll in college, obtain driver's licenses and legally secure jobs.

Related: For Dreamers, DACA's end could mean losing their homes

In September, President Trump announced he would end DACA and left it up to Congress to come up with alternative legislation. But with less than a month until that March 5 expiration date, lawmakers and the Trump administration remain at an impasse.

Should they fail to put another option in place, 915 Dreamers will lose protection from deportation each day, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

Alex's DACA status is on track to expire March 6 -- just one day after Congress' deadline.

Last month, after a federal judge in California temporarily blocked the Trump administration's efforts to end DACA, Alex was able to submit a two-year renewal application. But there is no

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The tradeoffs will be significant: Alex will be abandoning the \$10,000 in tuition she's paid and the two years' worth of community college credits she's built up in her pursuit to become a veterinary technician. She will also have to quit her job at clothing store Forever 21, where she was just promoted to a merchandising position four weeks ago.

And she will leave behind friends she has known since middle and high school, invaluable relationships that she says have shaped her life.

"In all honesty, it is scary to think about leaving," she said. "My mom cried for the first time since we talked about our situation. She's a positive person and is hoping that something good will happen for us."



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"When Hugo Chavez became president in the late 1990s, things started to change and become difficult for the middle class," said Daniela.

Their father wanted the family to escape the situation. The family arrived in the U.S. on visitor visas and then overstayed. They settled into a one-bedroom apartment in Burlington, New Jersey, where they still live today. Alex and Daniella share a pullout sofa bed.

"I only realized I was undocumented when I was in middle school," said Alex. It happened when the DACA program was enacted in 2012 and Daniela was old enough to apply. "Most of my school friends still don't know about my situation," she said.

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When Alex gained her own DACA status at 15, she was able to get a driver's license and later start taking classes at Camden County College in New Jersey.

In March, she'll find out whether she will be accepted into the college's two-year vet tech program. If she gets in, it will be bittersweet -- especially if she has to leave the country and abandon her dream.

Even if her DACA renewal goes through, Alex worries that having valid DACA status won't mean anything if Congress doesn't find a permanent solution for Dreamers. Without the protections, she won't be able to legally drive, attend the vet tech program or work.

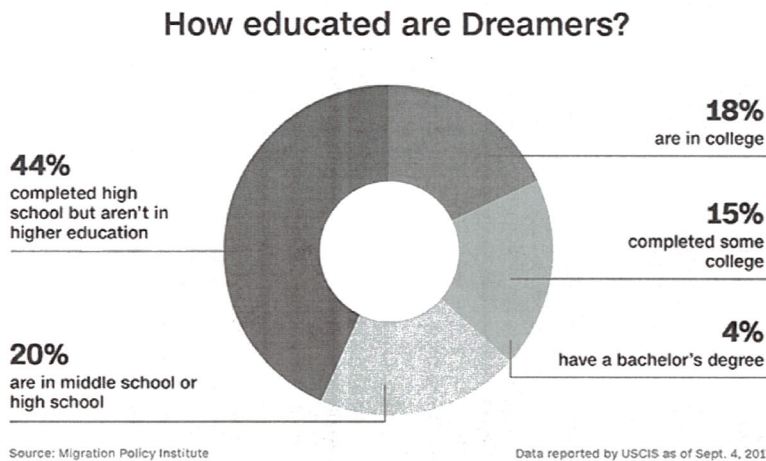
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Alex and Daniela have dual citizenship for Ecuador and Venezuela. "Daniela and I will go to Ecuador and start over with my family there," Alex said. "At least we will feel safe with family by our side."

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Daniela's DACA status doesn't expire until 2019, but she won't stay in the U.S. if her sister can't.

This isn't the first time Daniela has been confronted with leaving the country. Before DACA was in place, her teachers had told her she probably wouldn't be able to go to college because she was undocumented.



Daniela and Alex Velez

Then DACA was enacted and she got her status at 18. It was a turning point.

Since then, Daniela has earned two associates' degrees, in engineering and business administration, from Rowan College in New Jersey. She's now pursuing an undergraduate degree in business administration at Rutgers Business School while she works full-time for the New Jersey Business & Industry Association managing memberships.

She's also a budding entrepreneur. In 2016, she invested about \$1,500 and co-founded Innovated Lab Designs, which sells take-home kits for physics labs at Rowan College. The kits allow students who can't attend college lab courses to take an online version at home.

Daniela is adamant about not living in the U.S. as an undocumented person.

"One thing I've learned is my talent and skill are mine. No one can take those away. It will be hard to start life again, but we will not stay the rest of 2018 in America," she said.

--Are you a Dreamer who is planning to leave the United States if Congress fails to reach a permanent solution on DACA by March 5? We want to hear from you here:
parija.bhatnagar@turner.com

CNNMoney (New York)
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